

**POLICY BRIEF**

# **How did Michigan educators respond to the suspension of face-to-face instruction due to COVID-19?**

## **An analysis of educators' responses to the 2020 EPIC COVID-19 survey**

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# **How did Michigan educators respond to the suspension of face-to-face instruction due to COVID-19?**

## **An analysis of educators' responses to the 2020 EPIC COVID-19 survey**

By Amy Cummings, Tara Kilbride, Meg Turner, Qiong Zhu, Katharine O. Strunk

### **INTRODUCTION**

On April 2, 2020, due to the spread of the COVID-19 virus, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer issued Executive Order No. 2020-35, which suspended all in-person K-12 instruction for the remainder of the school year.<sup>1</sup> Even as school buildings across the state remained closed, educators continued to provide instruction, learning opportunities, and other supports to their students from a distance. These unprecedented changes raised questions about how students would learn when removed from their school buildings and sparked serious concerns about inequitable access to technology, broadband, distance learning resources, and other supports that might exacerbate existing achievement gaps among Michigan students.

As states across the country similarly transitioned to distance learning, surveys of educators have contributed to the national discourse on the adequacy and equity of educational responses. Teacher surveys highlighted student-specific concerns including low engagement,<sup>2</sup> limited access to technology (e.g., electronic devices, internet),<sup>3</sup> and access to crucial services (e.g., meals,

counseling).<sup>4</sup> Principal surveys and national research similarly emphasized concerns about students' limited access to technology, especially given the prominent role of technology as a key educational resource for families learning from a distance. They also raised questions about the connection between access to technology and concerns over equity given the substantial differences in student access by race, socioeconomic status, and geographic location.<sup>5</sup> If students lack access to the internet or an appropriate device, this can restrict the type of distance learning provided (i.e., instructional packets versus synchronous learning);<sup>6</sup> affect student engagement;<sup>7</sup> contribute to students' feelings of disconnectedness from their peers, teachers, and school communities;<sup>8</sup> and add financial strain to schools and districts that provide devices and/or internet access for students.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to a shared concern about technology, surveys of teachers and principals across the country have surfaced a need for greater guidance and supports.<sup>10</sup> In particular, principals indicate a need for strategies to handle the loss of "hands-on learning," technology for students, training for teachers, and materials to support instruction.<sup>11</sup> Teachers report that they need assistance with strategies to improve student engagement, and teachers of students with disabilities, homeless students, and English Learners express the desire for more or better guidance about how to support these populations.<sup>12</sup>

To begin to understand how Michigan educators responded during the transition to distance learning, the [Education Policy Innovation Collaborative](#) (EPIC) conducted a survey of K-8 teachers and principals in traditional public schools (TPSs) and charter schools (in Michigan, called Public School Academies or PSAs) across the state.<sup>13</sup> The survey asked educators about how they were engaging with students, the challenges they were facing, the resources and supports they were using, and their concerns about the impacts of COVID-19.

## DATA AND METHODOLOGY

### DATA

We developed survey instruments for K-8 teachers and principals in both traditional public schools and charter schools. We relied on multiple strategies to reach Michigan educators. We directly emailed superintendents and K-8 principals at their district email addresses and asked them to participate and to pass on the link to their staff. We also contacted teachers directly using the email address associated with their Michigan Online Educator Certification System (MOECS) account.<sup>14</sup> Finally, we promoted the survey through the EPIC website, Twitter, and through partnerships with several Michigan education associations.<sup>15</sup>

In total, 8,565 teachers and 316 principals responded to the COVID-19 educator survey, a response rate of 16% and 12% respectively.<sup>16</sup> Table 1 shows the sample size and response rates for each group.

A comparison of demographic characteristics between the survey sample and the target population shows that our survey sample is generally representative of the population on most characteristics, though there are exceptions. Women and educators who were hired within the past five years are slightly overrepresented in the survey sample, as are educators with an elementary teaching certification and those with an English Language Arts (ELA) endorsement.<sup>17</sup>

**Table 1. Sample Size and Response Rates for COVID-19 Survey Questions**

	Overall	TPS	PSA
<b>TEACHERS</b>			
Number of Survey Respondents	8565	7488	1077
Percent of Target Population	16%	15%	18%
<b>PRINCIPALS</b>			
Number of Survey Respondents	316	257	59
Percent of Target Population	12%	11%	18%

We linked survey responses to two outside data sources to examine how different subgroups of educators responded to the survey. We included information from state administrative datasets about the average achievement of third through seventh grade students in the district on the 2019 state ELA assessment, the percentage of students in the district classified as economically disadvantaged during the 2018-2019 school year, the sector or “district type” (i.e., TPS or PSA), and the district locale (i.e. urban, suburb/town, or rural). Using estimates from the 2014-2018 American Community Survey, we also considered the proportion of households in the area served by a district that have a computer with a broadband internet subscription.<sup>18</sup> In the average Michigan school district, approximately three-quarters of households have broadband internet subscriptions.

We classified districts into “low,” “medium,” and “high” ELA achievement, socioeconomic status (or “SES,” measured as the percent of students that are economically disadvantaged), and broadband internet access categories depending on whether they fell in the bottom quartile, middle two quartiles, or top quartile of districts on each particular measure. In addition to these subgroups, we examined differences between TPS and charter districts, and for teachers, across districts in urban, suburb or town, and rural locales.<sup>19</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

We generated a set of Michigan-specific survey items modeled on the Tennessee Education Research Alliance (TERA)’s bank of COVID-19-related questions on their 2020 Tennessee Educator Survey. We administered the survey from May 6<sup>th</sup> to June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020. The teacher survey asked about supports and resources used in transitioning to distance learning, concerns about the impact of the suspension of face-to-face instruction on students, the steps they have taken to engage with students, and the challenges they have faced in this transition. The principal survey similarly asked about supports and resources as well as concerns with transitioning to distance learning and included additional questions about the communications they and the families in their schools have received from various groups.

We analyzed overall patterns in each group’s responses to these questions, as well as differences in responses across subgroups of teachers and principals (i.e., based on the average ELA performance, SES, proportion of households with broadband internet, locale, and sector of the district where they are employed). Statistics reported in this brief are based on the original survey sample without adjustments for non-response.

## CAVEATS

Before we present the findings, it is important to note that our results represent educators' perceptions and reported responses to the transition to distance learning, and not necessarily their actual implementation of instruction after school buildings closed and distance learning began. Further, given the proportion of educators represented in the survey and limited sample size for principals, these findings should be interpreted with caution when generalized to all K-8 public school teachers and principals in Michigan.

## FINDINGS

### FINDING 1: Educators reported concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on both instruction and student well-being.

Teachers and principals alike expressed concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on both instruction and student well-being. The greatest proportions of educators reported concerns about students missing instructional time (85% of teachers and 91% of principals reported being either “concerned” or “extremely concerned”), the long-term economic impacts of the pandemic for their students (83% and 89%), supporting students through grief and trauma related to the pandemic (73% and 85%), students missing crucial services/supports when school buildings are closed (e.g., free/reduced meals, counseling; 79% and 83%), barriers preventing students from accessing e-learning (78% for both groups), and maintaining and building relationships with students in spite of distance and uncertainty (75% and 82%).

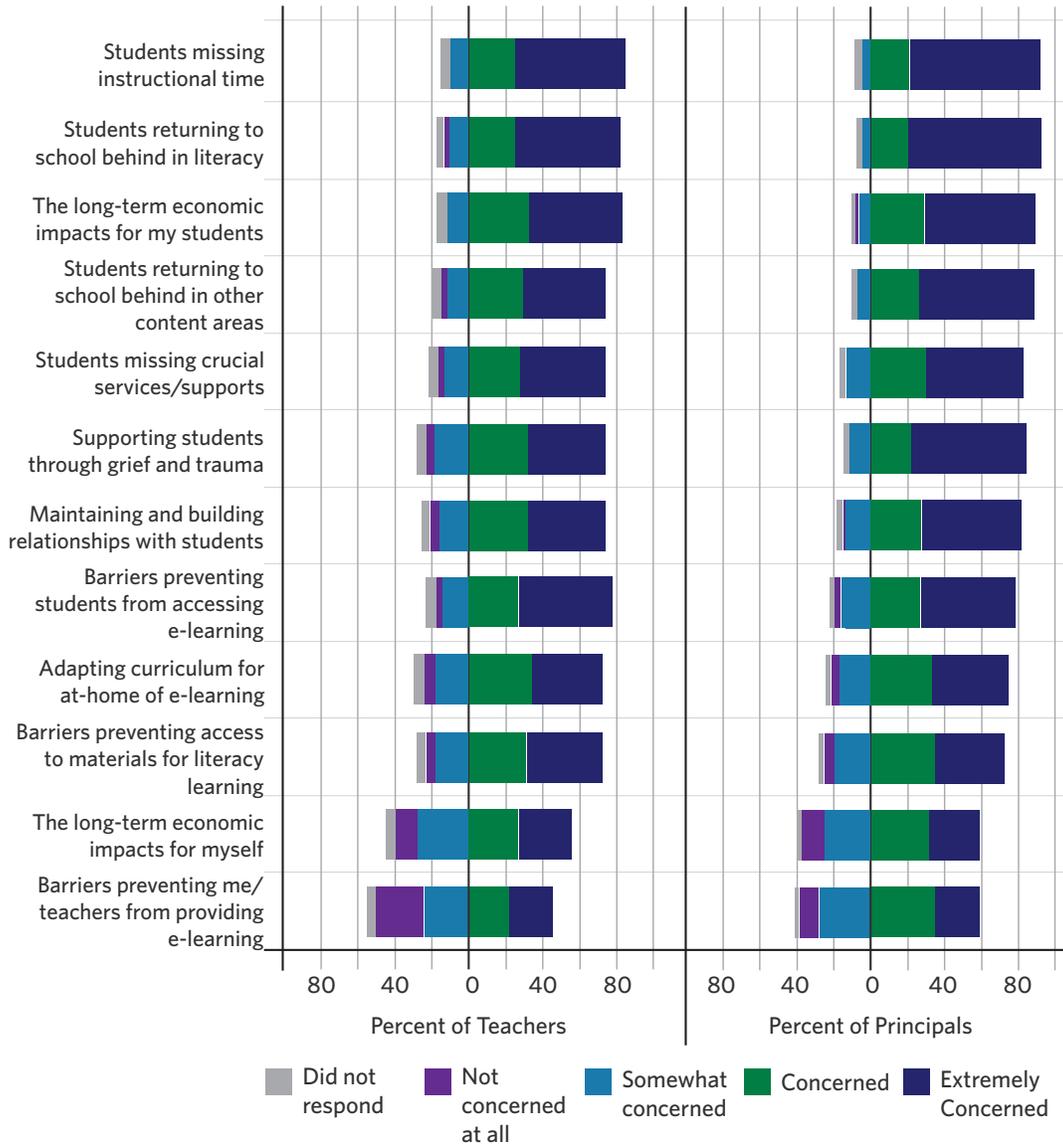
#### **Educators are more concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on their students than on themselves.**

On the other hand, fewer educators were worried about the impact of COVID-19 on their own ability to provide distance learning or the long-term economic impacts for themselves; fewer than 50% of educators noted that they were “concerned” or “extremely concerned” about either issue.

#### **Educators are worried about students returning to school behind in literacy.**

Both teachers (83%) and principals (92%) reported being “concerned” or “extremely concerned” about students returning to school behind in literacy. This finding was consistent across districts with varying ELA performance, SES, and broadband access, suggesting that this is a broad-based concern among Michigan educators. Elementary teachers and principals were particularly anxious about the impact on student literacy, which may be attributable to the state's Read by Grade Three Law aimed at improving student achievement in literacy in the early grades via additional monitoring, support, and retention of students who are more than one grade level behind in reading by the end of third grade.

Figure 1. Educators' Concerns Over the Impact of COVID-19



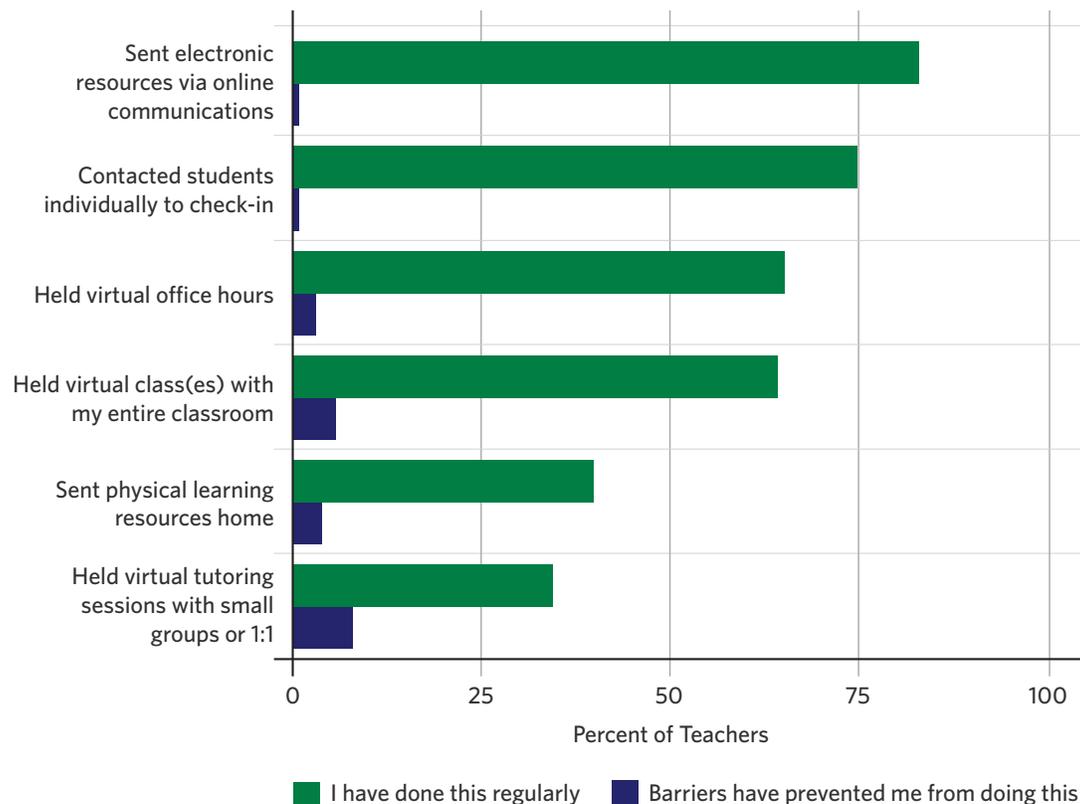
**More elementary educators and educators working in districts with lower ELA achievement, student SES, and broadband access were worried about the impacts of COVID-19.**

In general, higher proportions of elementary teachers and principals were concerned about the impact of COVID-19. For instance, 88% of K-5 principals reported that they were “concerned” or “extremely concerned” about barriers preventing students from accessing e-learning while less than two-thirds of middle-school principals reported the same. In addition, 94% of principals working in low-performing schools were worried about students missing instructional time, relative to 84% of principals in high-performing districts. While these patterns are not surprising given evidence that suggests that learning loss may be particularly detrimental to students in lower grades and to students from populations that historically have been underserved by K-12 education, they nonetheless surface concerns about the inequitable consequences of the pandemic.<sup>20</sup>

## FINDING 2: Teachers most often reported regularly engaging with students via online resources and communications and less often sent home physical resources.

Teachers most often reported engaging with students by regularly sending electronic resources via student/parent emails or other online communications (e.g., Seesaw, Class Dojo; 83%), followed by contacting students individually to check in (75%), and holding virtual office hours (66%). They less frequently sent home physical learning resources such as homework packets or books (40%) or held virtual tutoring sessions with small groups or one-on-one (35%).

Figure 2. Reported Methods of Engaging with Students

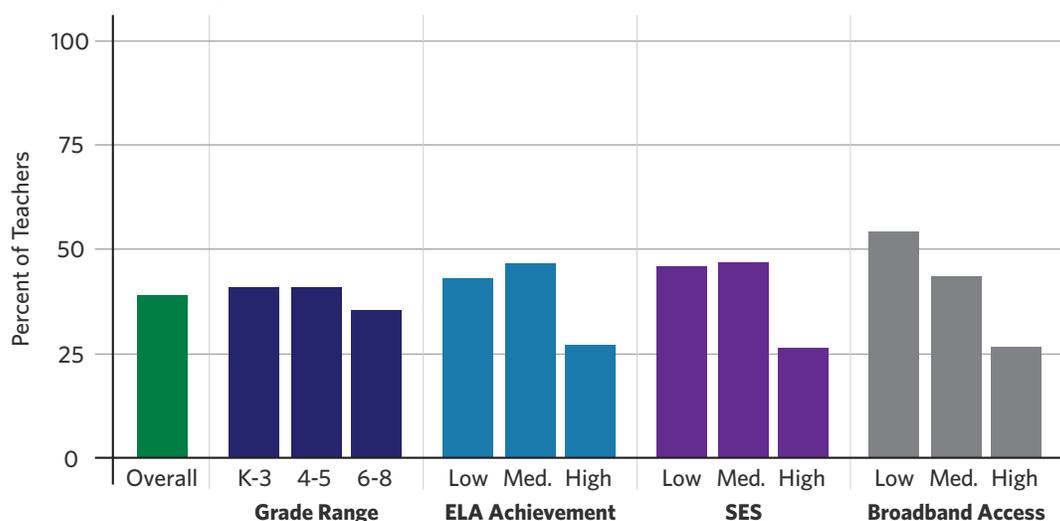


### Elementary teachers and those working in districts with lower ELA achievement, student SES, and broadband access were more likely to report regularly sending home physical learning resources than their peers in other districts.

Although relatively few teachers overall sent home physical resources, certain subgroups of teachers were more likely to rely on such materials. For example, elementary teachers were slightly more likely to report regularly sending home physical resources (42%) than middle-school teachers (36%). Further, teachers working in districts with low or medium ELA achievement were much more likely to report that they regularly sent home physical resources (44% and 48%, respectively, compared to 28% in high-achieving districts). We see similar percentages for teachers working in districts with lower student SES. As might be expected, teachers working in districts with low broadband access were also much more likely to report

regularly sending physical resources home (55%) than those working in districts with medium (45%) or high (27%) access.

**Figure 3. Percent of Teachers That Regularly Sent Home Physical Learning Resources**



**Teachers reported that the most prevalent barriers to engaging with students were related to technology and families’ ability to assist with assignments.**

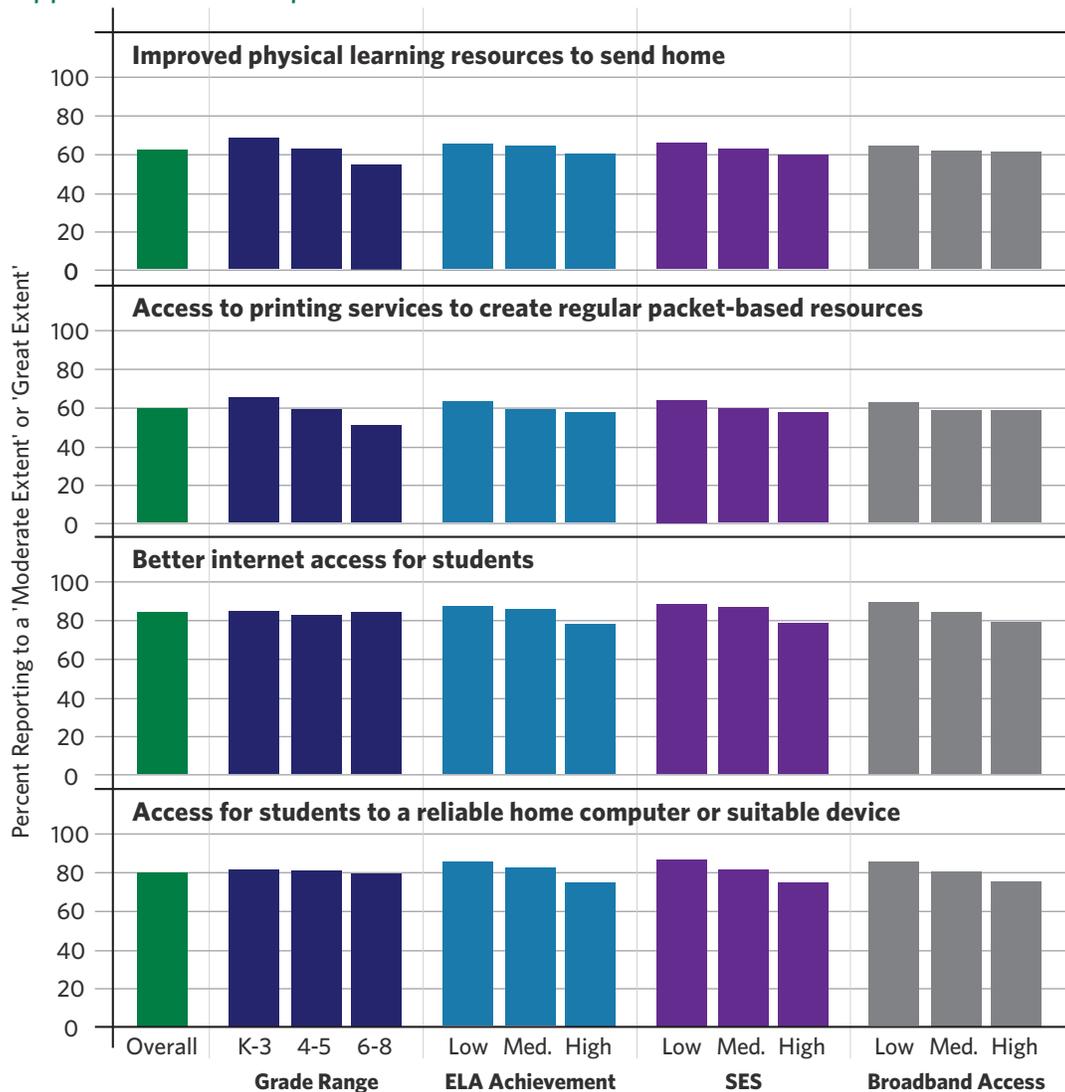
Relatively few teachers indicated that barriers prevented them from engaging in listed activities (see blue bars in Figure 2). However, those that did, suggested that they faced challenges holding virtual tutoring sessions (nine percent) and virtual classes (six percent). When we asked these teachers what prevented them from engaging with students, teachers most commonly cited students’ and families’ lack of sufficient broadband access or technology and families’ lack of time or ability to assist with accessing and completing assignments. Fewer teachers were concerned about their own access to broadband or technology or worried that they did not have the requisite knowledge or training to implement remote learning.

### FINDING 3: Educators believed that better internet access and access to devices would help to improve distance learning.

Teachers and principals agreed that better internet access for students (83% and 90%, respectively) and access for students to a reliable home computer or suitable device (80% for both) would be helpful “to a moderate or great extent” in providing or improving upon distance learning. Unsurprisingly, teachers in districts with low achievement, student SES, and broadband access were more likely to report that these supports would be helpful.

Teachers in these same districts were also more likely than their peers to indicate that access to physical learning resources (e.g., homework packets, books) would be helpful. Further, both teachers and principals in lower grade levels were more likely to indicate that improved physical learning resources and access to printing services would be helpful in improving distance learning efforts. The desire for improved physical learning resources among these groups aligns with earlier findings that these same educators are more likely to report regularly using these types of learning materials.

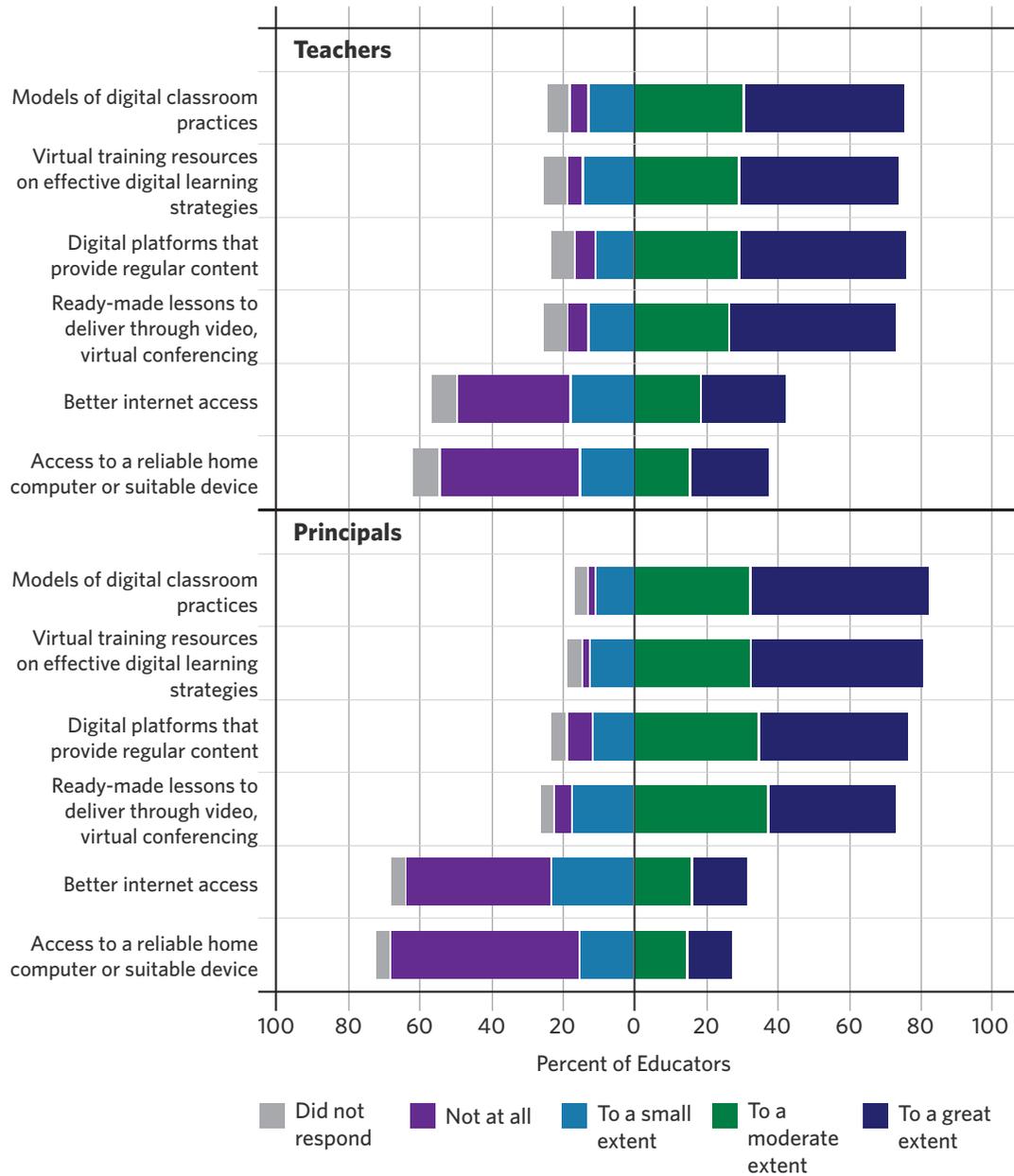
**FIGURE 4. Percent of Teachers Reporting That a Particular Support Would be Helpful**



**FINDING 4: To improve their ability to facilitate distance learning, teachers want virtual resources that provide content, training, strategies, and ready-made lessons.**

Most educators did not indicate that they needed better internet access or access to a reliable device to improve their remote offerings. However, teachers and principals agreed that resources to assist teachers in delivering remote instruction would be helpful to facilitate distance learning, including digital platforms that provide regular content (76% and 77%, respectively), virtual training resources for teachers on effective digital distance learning strategies (74% and 81%), models of digital classroom practices (76% and 83%), and ready-made lessons for teachers to deliver (74% and 73%, respectively). This was especially the case for elementary educators and teachers working in districts with low ELA achievement and low student SES.

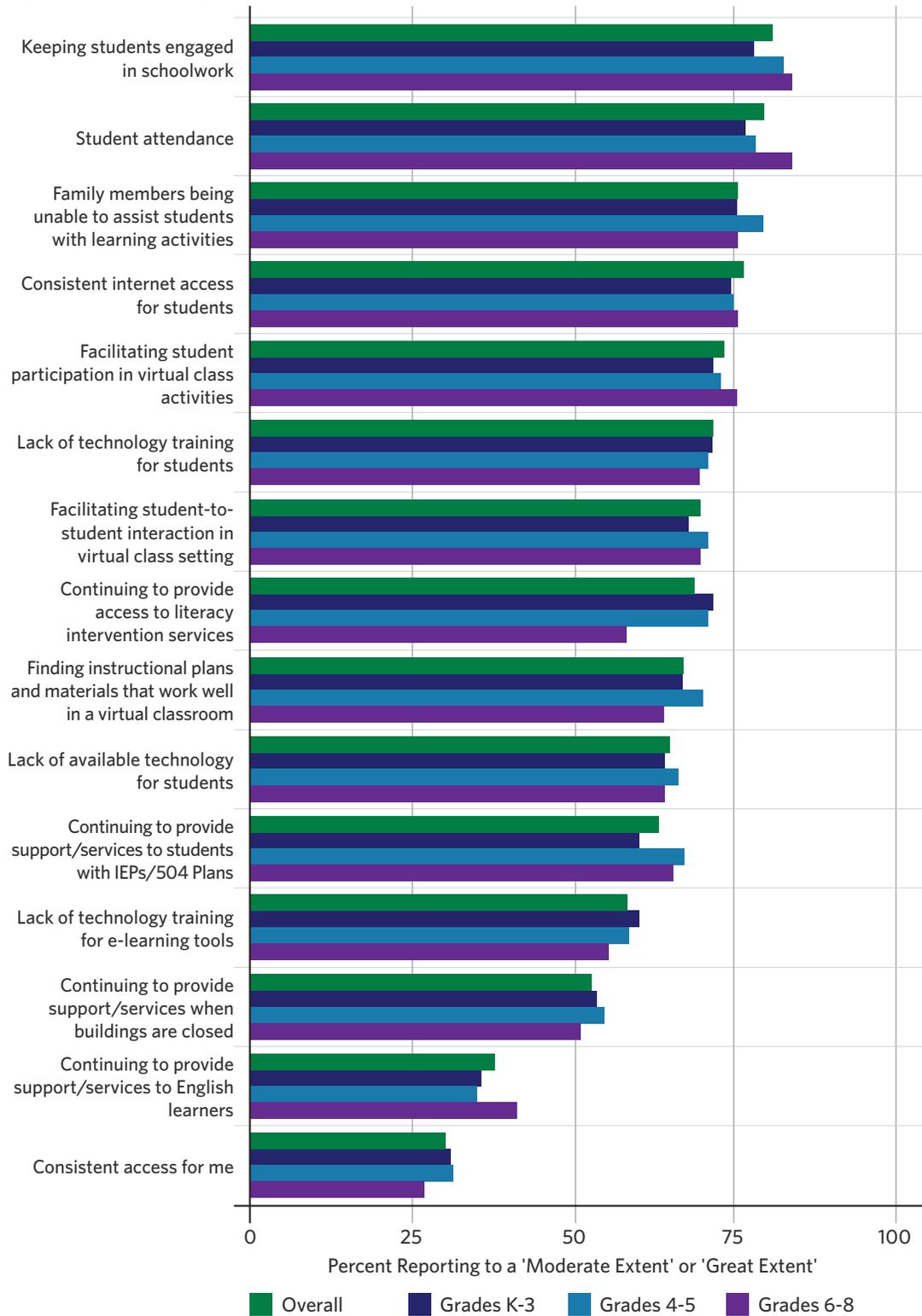
Figure 5. Helpfulness of Supports for Teachers and Principals



**FINDING 5:** Teachers reported that the greatest challenges they faced in transitioning to remote learning revolved around student engagement and access to technology.

Teachers indicated that keeping students engaged in schoolwork and student attendance were the greatest challenges in transitioning to remote learning (82% and 81%, respectively). They also reported that challenges with remote instruction included family members being unable to assist students with learning activities (77%), consistent internet access for students (75%), facilitating student participation in virtual class activities (73%), and lack of technology training for students (72%).

Figure 6. Challenges Faced by Teachers



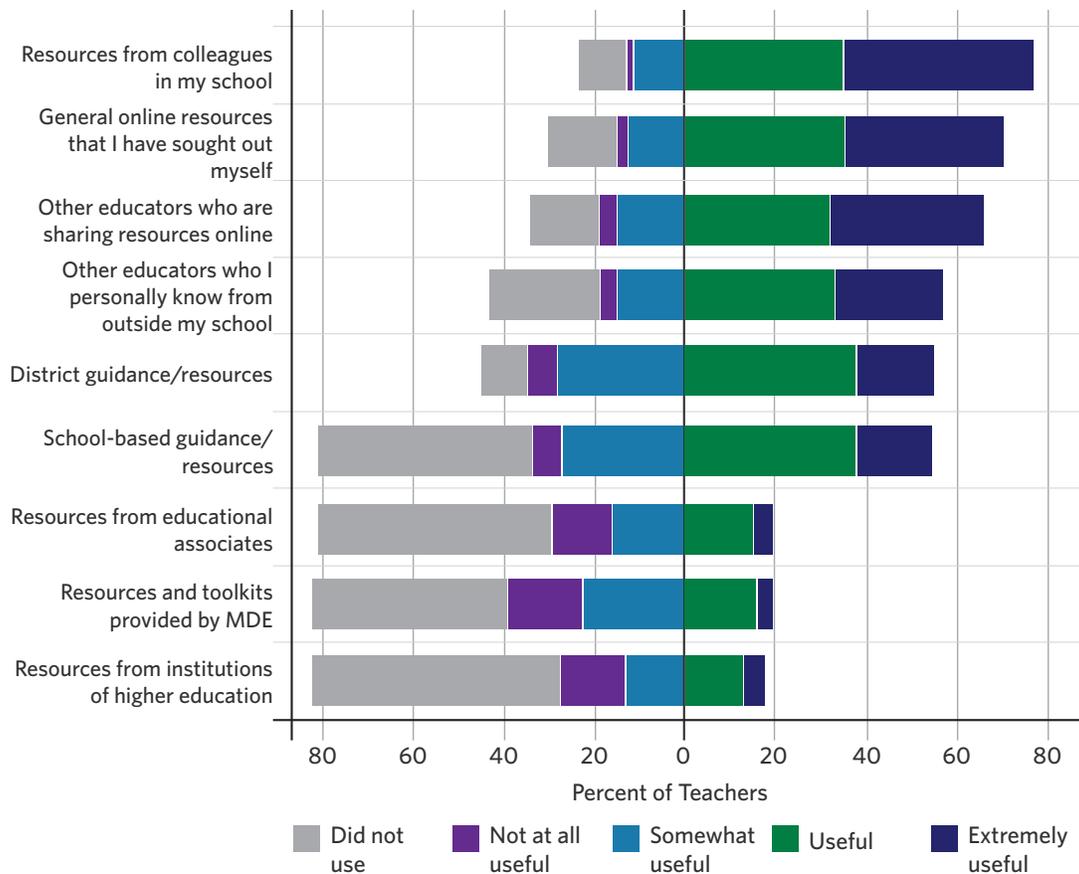
Middle and elementary school teachers reported different challenges with distance instruction. Middle school teachers were slightly more likely than elementary teachers to indicate that student attendance and keeping students engaged were challenges. Elementary teachers, on

the other hand, were substantially more likely to worry about their ability to provide access to literacy services to students who receive extra literacy supports, with more K-3 (73%) and 4-5 (72%) teachers indicating that this has been a challenge than 6-8 teachers (60%). This may be a reflection of the Read by Grade Three Law's focus on literacy interventions and supporting struggling readers in the early grades. When it came to technology, consistent internet access and availability of technology for students were more often reported as challenges by teachers in districts with low student SES.

### FINDING 6: Teachers reported tapping into their own networks and seeking their own resources more often than using those official channels provided.

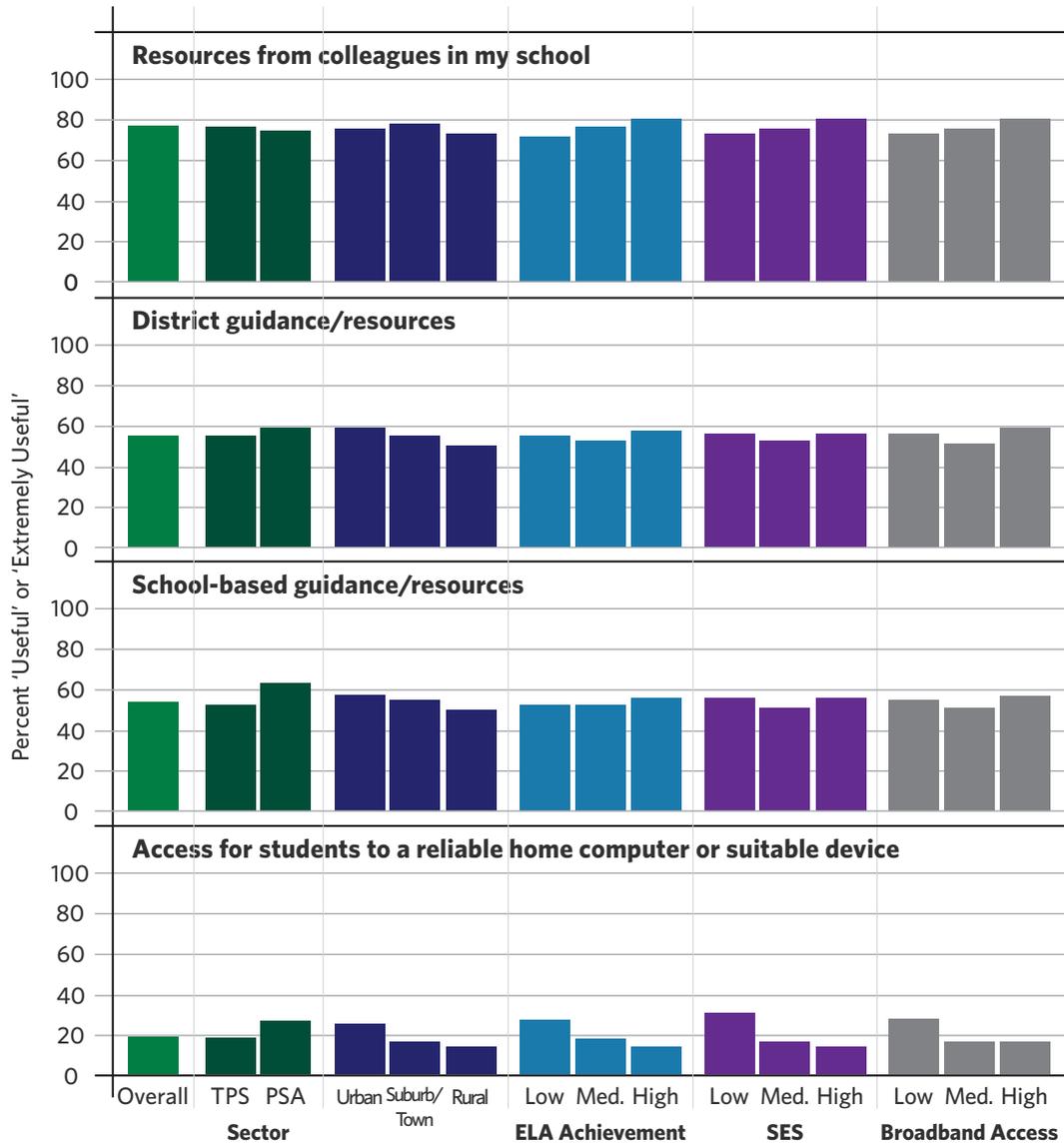
After in-person instruction was suspended for the remainder of the 2019-20 school year, Michigan school districts created and implemented Continuity of Learning (COL) plans for continuing instruction and student services remotely. Teachers reported using a range of supports and resources to implement their districts' COL plans, but these resources varied in usefulness. Though most teachers reported receiving guidance or resources from their schools and districts, they generally did not find these to be as useful as resources from their colleagues or online resources they sought out themselves. Most teachers did not report using resources from more distant organizations like the Michigan Department of Education (MDE), educational associations, or institutions of higher education.

Figure 7. Reported Usefulness of Supports/Resources in Implementing COL Plan



However, this pattern varies by subgroup. Teachers in districts with lower ELA performance, lower student SES, lower broadband access, urban districts, and charters were somewhat more likely to report that resources from official channels were “useful” or “extremely useful,” while teachers in districts with the opposite characteristics more often gave those ratings to resources from informal networks.

**Figure 8. Differences in Reported Usefulness of Resources by Subgroup**



**FINDING 7: Principals reported more helpful communication from local groups.**

Principals reported that communications from the local level were more frequent and of higher quality than those coming from larger organizations and state-level institutions. Principals were most likely to report that communications from their district’s leadership have been “good” or “excellent” during COVID-19 (83%). They less often reported that communications from the principals’ association

(64%), MDE (59%), the Executive Office of the Governor (59%), and ISD leadership (54%) were of this quality. This is perhaps because district administrators are tasked with directly communicating with their school leaders, a role that takes on increased importance during a crisis.

In transitioning to distance learning, various groups communicated with parents and families about instruction and the continuation of student supports and services. Ninety-four percent of principals reported that parents/families had received “occasional” or “regular” communication from them/their school leadership, and 87% said the same of district leadership. Principals reported that parents received communication less frequently from ISD leadership, MDE, and the teachers’ and principals’ associations, and were more likely to indicate that they did not know the extent of communications these groups were providing to parents and families. These differences are not surprising given that the latter groups are not responsible for communicating directly with parents and families about education policies. Further, elementary principals and those in districts with high ELA performance, student SES, and broadband access were most likely to indicate that families had received “occasional” or “regular” communication from school and district leadership.

## LISTENING TO MICHIGAN’S EDUCATORS: MAIN THEMES FROM THE EDUCATOR SURVEY

Three main themes emerge from the findings in this brief that are worth considering as Michigan educators look ahead to the 2020-21 school year:

- 1. Students in districts with low achievement, SES, and broadband access faced the greatest challenges and have the highest needs in transitioning to distance learning.** Educators working in these districts were most likely to report higher levels of concern about the impact of COVID-19 generally, and specifically on students returning to school behind in literacy. They were also most likely to report that better internet access for students and access for students to reliable devices would be helpful. Relatedly, they more often reported regularly sending home physical learning resources than their counterparts in higher-achieving, higher-resourced districts did.
- 2. Technology and access to the internet are important in implementing remote instruction.** Educators reported that better internet access for students and access for students to reliable devices would be helpful in providing or improving upon distance learning. Consistent internet access and a lack of technology training for students were also among teachers’ top reported challenges in transitioning to remote learning. Likely related, they also cited challenges in facilitating student attendance and engagement — both of which would be difficult without appropriate access to the necessary technology and learning materials. All of this is especially true for educators in districts with low ELA achievement, student SES, and broadband access.
- 3. Educators relied more on local resources and communications in navigating the transition to distance learning.** For teachers, this meant tapping into networks of colleagues and other educators and seeking out their own resources to facilitate remote instruction. Further, principals rated communications from their local district to be of higher quality than those from larger organizations or the state level. They also indicated that parents and families had received more frequent communications from schools and districts than they had from these larger or state organizations.

# LESSONS FOR MICHIGAN IN FALL 2020 AND BEYOND

Even as the outlook for the 2020-21 school year is continuously shifting, educators in Michigan and across the country are working to plan for their students' return to school in the fall. Important lessons can be learned from educators' early perspectives about distance education and the challenges they and their students faced during the spring of 2020. In particular, educators' responses highlight four specific recommendations for the upcoming school year:

- 1. Equip all students with the necessary learning materials to allow them to fully engage in remote instruction.** Overall, teachers and principals, both in Michigan and nationally, agreed that better internet access for students and access to devices would be helpful in providing and improving on distance learning efforts.<sup>21</sup> This is especially true in Michigan, which consistently ranks in the bottom half of states in access to broadband internet as well as the availability of household computers. As a result, an estimated 419,000 Michigan students were unable to participate in virtual online learning.<sup>22</sup> Given the lack of technology and access in Michigan, educators working in districts with low ELA achievement, low student SES, and low broadband access have also indicated that, while better internet access and access to devices would be helpful, so would access to physical learning resources such as packet-based materials and hard copy books. Given that schools and districts with different characteristics report delivering instruction in varying ways, ensuring that the appropriate instructional materials are available — whether those are electronic or physical — is a necessary first step in ensuring that students can equitably engage in distance learning.
- 2. Expand access to literacy resources for distance learning.** Educators' cited students returning to school behind in literacy as one of their top concerns. At the same time, districts' Continuity of Learning plans were notably lacking guidance on how to support students identified with a "reading deficiency"; only four percent of all Michigan school districts addressed any modifications or accommodations for students identified with reading deficiencies or students with individual reading intervention plans (IRIPs) in their COL plans, and only three percent explicitly stated that the district would provide required literacy interventions for these students.<sup>23</sup> Given the state's emphasis on literacy and the high-profile Read by Grade Three Law, clear guidance in this area will be necessary to support educators as they provide literacy instruction to students.
- 3. Continue to focus efforts on both instruction and student support services, particularly in lower-achieving, economically disadvantaged districts.** Teachers and principals were immensely worried about the impact of COVID-19 on instruction and student well-being. They expressed high levels of concern about students missing instructional time and crucial services and supports when school buildings are closed, as well as maintaining and building relationships with students during these uncertain times. These concerns were greater among teachers working in districts with low ELA achievement, student SES, and broadband access. This highlights inequities — also raised in national studies — in terms of students' access to both instruction and support services during the pandemic.<sup>24</sup> As the pandemic continues into the 2020-21 school year, instructional resources and support services should be targeted and distributed to the students with the most need to prevent further exacerbating these existing inequities.

- 4. Utilize local communication channels to distribute information and distance learning resources.** Educators reported relying on local networks for distance learning resources and information. Teachers most often reported that distance learning resources from colleagues in their schools and online — including resources they sought out themselves and those other educators shared — were most useful in helping them implement their district’s COL plan. It is not clear why teachers found these resources to be more useful than those from other sources. However, encouraging and facilitating educators’ sharing of resources has the potential to help spread useful instructional practices. Meanwhile, principals gave communications coming from their local district the highest ratings and indicated that parents and families are receiving communications most often from the school and district level. This suggests that such local communication channels may be most effective in distributing resources and information related to remote instruction. Those working at higher organizational levels (e.g., teachers’ and principals’ associations and state policymakers) might consider how to better channel information and resources through local levels to reach educators and families.

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10. Kemper Patrick, S., & Newsome, U. (2020).
11. Hamilton et al. (2020).
12. Hamilton et al. (2020).; Kemper Patrick, S., & Newsome, U. (2020).
13. These survey questions were added to the Survey of Educators' Perspectives on the Michigan Read by Grade Three Law on May 6, 2020 and remained available for educators to respond to through June 30, 2020. The Survey of Educators' Perspectives on the Michigan Read by Grade Three Law originally launched on February 18, 2020. Educators who had already completed the Read by Grade Three Survey received a separate link via follow-up email inviting them to complete a COVID-19 mini-survey, and those who had not yet completed it received the COVID-19 questions as a separate section at the end of the full survey.
14. Although there is no database of district-provided e-mail addresses for all teachers in the state, we worked with MDE to contact teachers directly using the personal e-mail addresses associated with their accounts in MOECS. About 94% of educators who were actively employed in Fall 2019 had an e-mail address listed in their MOECS account. The remaining six percent are educators whose teaching licenses do not require renewal through the MOECS system (i.e., these licenses are no longer issued but are still valid for educators who hold them).
15. The education associations that promoted the survey included the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators (MAISA) General Education Leadership Network's (GELN) Early Literacy Task Force (ELTF); The Michigan Education Association (MEA); The American Federation of Teachers (AFT); The Michigan Association of Public School Academies (MAPSA); The Michigan Association of School Administrators (MASA); and The Michigan Elementary and Middle School Principals Association (MEMSPA).
16. The target population of teachers includes 54,456 teachers who were identified based on the following criteria: (1) actively employed in LEA or PSA schools that were authorized to teach at least one K-8 grade and had teachers assigned to grade-specific classrooms or special education students ages 6-21 as of fall 2019; (2) having relevant Financial Information Database (FID) function codes (elementary, middle, special education, or compensatory education); (3) holding a teaching license or long-term substitute permit; (4) assigned in a K-8 grade or relevant grade settings (special education ages 6-21, ELS, bilingual, alternative, or migrant education) with an elementary teaching certification; and (4) not working as counselors, library media specialists, or having an assignment that spans both K-5 and high school grades. The target population of principals was identified from the Educational Entity Master (EEM), including 2,672 principals of LEA or PSA schools with instructions in at least one K-8 grade.

## REFERENCES (*continued*)

17. This is unsurprising as the COVID-19 survey was administered as part of EPIC's Survey of Educators' Perspectives on the Michigan Read by Grade Three Law. We define an ELA endorsement as any endorsement listed under "English/Language Arts" on the list of active and historical endorsements from the Michigan Department of Education (MDE). This includes five active endorsement areas (Language Arts, English, Speech, Reading Specialist, and Reading) and two historical endorsement areas that are no longer issued or are being phased out (Communication Arts and Journalism).
18. School district-level ACS data were obtained from IPUMS NHGIS, University of Minnesota, [www.nhgis.org](http://www.nhgis.org). For PSA districts, we use ACS broadband access data from the TPS district within the boundaries of which the PSA is physically located.
19. We only include locale subgroups for teachers because the sample size for the principal locale subgroups was not sufficiently large.
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